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Guatemala's long shadow of corruption

President Arévalo has promised to fight corruption. But he faces the mammoth task of dismantling the deeply flawed structures of his predecessors

By now, there is probably hardly anyone in Guatemala who hasn't heard the expression 'pact of the corrupt'. Thousands have taken to the streets recently because they are tired of the country's corrupt structures, of the taxes being mismanaged and of the state failing to protect citizens' rights. The consequences of corruption ripple through every aspect of Guatemalan society, affecting not only the economy but also the well-being of the citizens.

The Central American country is one of the 30 most corrupt countries in the world and the fifth most corrupt country in Latin America. For the longest time, the majority of the population had lost confidence in their state institutions. The self-declared anti-corruption President Bernardo Arévalo, who was sworn in on 15 January – after thousands demonstrated the fierce resistance of the opposition in favour of a peaceful handover of office – could offer some hope to the corruption-weary people. But he faces the mammoth task of dismantling the deeply flawed structures of his predecessors.

Determining the exact impact of corruption on Guatemalan society is difficult since much remains hidden. Missing funds are particularly evident in the health and education sectors. Manfredo Marroquín, the founder of *Acción Ciudadana* (Transparency International Guatemala), has been tracking corrupt structures for over 25 years and concludes that the last three governments have been the most corrupt in history. Corruption is not a new problem in Guatemala, but it has recently reached new heights with the thorough infiltration of all ministries. Marroquín notes that 'corruption kills people on the streets and in hospitals every day in Guatemala… Most of the schools are in ruins.' Even the teaching staff are stooges of the corrupt — with good salaries and secure jobs silencing dissent and, instead, getting them to publicly support the Ministry of Education.

Impacts on healthcare

San Juan Comalapa, a town of 50 000 inhabitants, has not had a functioning hospital for almost 10 years because the former director of the health facility ran off with the money earmarked for the hospital's maintenance, leaving the people to fend for themselves. From Thursday to Saturday, patients can come in and be treated by a doctor and a nurse. This initiative is carried by the local community rather than the state. The current director hoped for change, but the money promised by the ruling mayor prior to the elections never came.

In the neighbouring village of Chimaltenango, the state at least did *something*: in November, nine people were arrested for corruption as part of a razzia, having embezzled more than 67 million quetzals (around €7.8 million). The criminal investigation department also spoke of fraud and money laundering activities in this hospital. Marroquín confirms this interplay between corrupt politicians from the ministries and the hospital management: the money often stays directly in the Ministry of Health.

Over the years, political leaders have exploited their positions for personal gain, diverting public funds away from essential services and infrastructure projects.

One yet unsolved case *Acción Ciudadana* is investigating is that of the largest hospital in the country, San Juan de Dios, which recently lost power for more than 24 hours. According to the hospital management, the cause was a cable problem. But Marroquín sees the incident as a further consequence of corruption, which, according to the expert, caused seven deaths that have not yet been reported in the media.

Countless other cases have also sent people to their graves. Perhaps the most severe was a 'contentious deal' between the Mexican pharmaceutical company PISA and the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (IGSS), which gained international attention when over 50 kidney patients died and several others contracted infections. This was a direct consequence of IGSS' decision to work with the company, despite its lack of experience and proper infrastructure to care for its patients.

Impunity and cooperation of the corrupt

Over the years, political leaders have exploited their positions for personal gain, diverting public funds away from essential services and infrastructure projects. Those who try to fight the corrupt live dangerously: they are criminalised – like the protesters in favour of President Arévalo recently – or directly imprisoned.

The perpetrators, on the other hand, are often known but are either not investigated or turned a blind eye to by corrupt judges. In the case of the IGSS health scandal, Marroquín's team helped put the perpetrators in prison in a trial that lasted over four years. Still, after a short time, they were all released. Impunity and corrupt networks currently leave little chance for the fight against corruption.

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For several years, it was assumed that the situation in the country would improve as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), set up by the United Nations, took action against senior politicians, even presidents and vice-presidents, and arrest warrants were issued. But after 12 years of anti-corruption work, former head of state Jimmy Morales chased the CICIG out of the country under false pretences. Since then, the corrupt have been doing as they please, despite existing anti-corruption laws. Independent journalists end up in prison as soon as they report on the situation, others go into exile in Europe or the US.

The new President Arévalo has promised to dedicate himself to the fight against the disease of corruption and 'take back the institutions.' To that end, he has created a national anti-corruption commission. One of the first decisions after his inauguration was to improve monitoring of state employee budgets, such as vehicle expenses. He is also using legal means to persuade key figures like Consuelo Porass, Guatemala's Attorney General, who is known to be corrupt, to resign.

Seeing large parts of the population on the streets in protest, united in their opposition to the corrupt political elites, gives hope for Guatemala. But Marroquín remains cautious: 'the new president is not part of the corrupt constructions in Guatemala, but he probably does not have the capacity to break the whole system. I do not see that Arévalo can take action against such a powerful force, even if he has the intention.' The coming years will show whether Arévalo will be able to stand up to the pact of the corrupt, who had tried everything to prevent his presidency.

For a different perspective on this issue, read here.



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